

## How things went Wrong

Last week, we started talking about sex and intimacy. You've probably become aware over the last few years that what our society say and what the church teaches about sex are very different things. Only 50 years ago, most people largely agreed on sexual ethics—our greatest struggle was simply living up to the standards most people believed in. It's not that there was never pre-marital sex or affairs or out of wedlock babies, but when people did them they felt guilty because they believed in the Judeo-Christian sexual ethic even if they couldn't live up to it.

Well, those days are gone. All these sexual behaviors are still happening. In fact, they're on the increase because less and less people believe they're wrong.

But the problem is even more pronounced because not only do many people not believe in the Christian sexual ethics—it's not a matter live and let live—it's that many believe the Christian teaching is *harmful*. Many believe that we have new information from science and social science that tell us a different story. But the truth is, it's not new information that's fueling the changes in how we think about sex. The change goes all the way down to which story we believe about the world.

Do we believe that the world was an accident of nature or do we believe that it was designed as an act of a loving creator? That's where the difference begins.

Last week, we looked at the foundation for what Christians believe about the world in Genesis 1 and 2. That story tells us who God is, who we are, why we were created and it even tells us some things about the nature of reality. It tells us that we were created in the image of God, male and female. And it shows us God's design for sex and marriage. It describes the ideal world, but it also tells us how the story went wrong.

Genesis 2 tells us that when God placed Adam and Eve in the garden, he planted all kinds of regular trees for them to eat from. But he also placed two special trees in the garden. *The Tree of Life* and the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil*.

The Tree of Life was the tree that sustained them. Old Testament scholar John Walton has an insightful take on this. He says most people believe Adam and Eve were immortal. But he says Genesis doesn't tell us they were *immortal*. If they were immortal, why would they need to eat anything?

So, the fruit from the regular trees sustained them day to day, but the Tree of Life was like the fountain of youth, where eating the fruit day to day counteracted the aging process. As long as they continued to eat from that tree, they could live forever. That's why God took away that tree after they sinned. Regardless of the details, the Tree of Life represents dependence on God to give and sustain life.

The second *special* tree God put in the garden was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Unlike the Tree of Life, God told them not to eat that fruit. Which brings us

to the inevitable question: why would God want to keep Adam and Eve from knowing the difference between good and evil?

Well, in the Old Testament, the phrase “to know good and evil” is a Hebrew idiom for judging something to be right or wrong. So, it’s not so much *knowing* good and evil that’s forbidden, but *determining* what is good and evil. Eating from the tree was the declaration, “We’ll take it from here, God. We don’t really need you anymore.”

So, the choice Adam and Eve had to make wasn’t simply the choice of whether to follow an arbitrary rule God set up as a test of loyalty. It was the decision between trusting that God knows what’s best or to living by our own wisdom apart from God.

In chapter 3, all was going well when the serpent came to Eve and got her to question whether God is really trustworthy. “Did God really say you can’t eat from any tree in the garden?”

“No, just the one tree. He said don’t touch it or we’ll die.”

“Die? Did he say that? Oh, dear. You’re so gullible. Let me tell you a secret, God only told you that to limit you. But he’s *keeping* something from you. Do you see what he’s doing here? He’s jealous.”

“Jealous? Of who?”

“You! What’s really going on is that God knows that when you eat from that tree, you’ll be in charge of your own life. Right now, God can tell you what to do. But he knows

that once you eat that fruit, you're in charge of your own destiny. You can define your own reality. You don't have to live by his rules anymore. How great would that be?"

That was enough to convince them. Freedom and autonomy sounded great. So, they ate. But rather than making things better, eating the fruit started their unraveling.

After they ate, their eyes were opened and it says they realized they were *naked*. In other words, they realized they were vulnerable without God. Yes, they were free to determine their destiny, but with that freedom, came the anxiety of being on their own. They wanted to take hold of a blessing, but it ended up being a curse.

Now, the Bible uses Adam and Eve as archetypes. An archetype is someone who is representative of all of humanity. For instance, Genesis says Adam and Eve were created similar, but different. They were "suitable helpers" for each other. Then in verse 2:24, it says, **"That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh."** We know this isn't just talking about Adam because Adam didn't have a father and mother.

It's saying this story is the story of humanity, that didn't just happen once, it plays itself out over and over in human history. We look at *them* and we see ourselves. We look at their purpose and see our purpose. We look at their struggle and we see our struggles played out over and over in history.

Adam and Eve were faced with a choice to trust *God's* reality or create their own. We've struggles with that choice ever since.

Throughout all human history, men have dominated women and societies have also failed to keep sex within the bounds of marriage that God set. In Old Testament times, pagan societies engaged in ritual prostitution as part of their worship. In the Roman Empire, it was normal for men to only have sex with their wife in order to have children, but use their female slaves or young boys for pleasure.

It's not new for the Biblical ethics to be at odds with the sexual mores of the society around them. In fact, our society's views of sex aren't out of the ordinary. What's different today is that the attitudes of secular society are beginning to infiltrate the church and cause Western Christians to question the goodness of God and Christian teaching about sex that has been virtually unquestioned from the beginning.

But as I mentioned last week, questioning the church's teachings on sex didn't start with doubting the rules. It started because people tried to apply Christian rules, to a secular story and it didn't make sense. Today we live in a society that has largely reject God as its source of goodness and life and has instead tried to define it for ourselves apart from God's design. This temptation was the same as Adam and Eve's.

So today I want to drill down to the foundation so we can see some of the ways this departure from God's design plays itself out in our society. But I'm not doing it to

complain about how terrible the world is or to set the church up against the world. I'm talking about it, so we can understand how unbiblical beliefs have crept into the church. And I do this because I believe that if the church can hold firm to and model biblical sexuality, we can be a refuge for people who bear the scars of broken sexuality. And as we do I hope you'll see once again the beauty and healing of Biblical sexuality.

*Probably the foundational attitude that characterizes our society is what we call expressive individualism.* This is the mark of western society. We have set up a society where the greatest good in life is the success, pleasure and happiness of the individual. Of course, people have always wanted to be happy, but there have been few societies in history that have been so bent toward the individual.

The fragmentation we see in our society today is only the natural outgrowth of our obsession with individualism. Even in the church today, so often the purpose of our discipleship isn't to build social capital or strengthen the church. Most people participate in church only so they can be a better individual Christian, but seldom think much about how our community can become more of what Christ intended the church community to be. If the group doesn't seem to be growing me as a Christian, I don't see the value of it.

And this has major implications for how we think about sexuality. I don't know if you've noticed this, but the sexuality is a powerful force. And it can be powerful for good

or for evil. When it's kept within its bounds, it binds a couple together, but it wreaks havoc when it breaks loose from those boundaries.

You see, while the sex act is private, *sexuality* is a community issue. Biblically speaking, sex is a *societal* good, not just an *individual* good. Now I know sexual urges are so strong that people don't think about it that way. Our society certainly doesn't promote that mindset. I can't remember a time when I was in the mood and said to my wife, "*Hey baby. You want to work for the common good?*"

In fact, some people today try to make the argument that sexual morality or societal norms like marriage are only there to oppress women and keep them from enjoying sex. But actually, the opposite is true. The sexual revolution which began around 1968, at best hasn't delivered on its promise and at worst has been a complete disaster and it's largely women and children who pay the highest price.

Jonathan Grant in his book "Divine Sex" traces the movement from sex as a societal good to sex as a means of personal pleasure and fulfilment. He traces five stages:

It started with the separation of sex from *procreation* through contraception. Now, I don't believe contraception is, in itself immoral. I don't believe every sexual act must be open to procreation. But what it has done is made procreation an after-thought, if it's a thought at all. Sex is now pretty much only a means for two people to express their love.

He says the *second* step was the separation of sex from *marriage* a cohabitation became the norm. The couple might be committed to each other in their minds, but it wasn't necessary for them to state it out loud.

*Third* was the separation of sex from any need for partnership at all, as sex became temporary and recreational. *Random* hookups were now widely accepted, facilitated by apps like Tinder which isn't a dating app, it's a hookup app.

The *fourth* step was when sex was separated from another *person* through the explosion of online pornography, and *finally* from our own bodies through questioning the very categories of "male" and "female."

Through that process, the shift in mindset was complete. It only took a matter of 60 years to change the purpose of sex and the meaning of marriage that stood from the beginning of time. And now, without the societal limits, we see the result. In the years immediately the sexual revolution hit, 1968 to 1980, the divorce rate more than doubled.

Part of the reason is the acceptance of sex outside of marriage. Studies today show that a woman who never had a sexual partner before marriage has only a 5% chance of divorcing, but a woman who has had 2 previous partners has a 30% chance of divorcing.

In 1960, about 5% of babies in the U.S. were born out of wedlock. Today the number is 40% nationally. And most children born to millennials age 28-34 are born outside of marriage. In one study, five years after the baby, only 16% of couples had

married and 60% of them were no longer together. Now, of course all children are a gift and we love them. But children who grow up with their mom and dad have a far better chance in life than those who don't. But as the rate of fragile families grows, the cost to the government to make sure those children are cared for becomes unsustainable.

Now, marriage alone won't magically fix finances. But couples that understand that the point of marriage isn't just personal happiness, but a societal good and good for their child are more likely to stay together. All that is to say that we pay a high price for fostering individualistic attitudes around sex. But living within God's design for sex sustains a society by helping to harness the binding power and restrain the destructive power of sex.

We only have time for one more, but another important way society's view of sexuality is different than Christianity's is that society today is that our society is what many call a *culture of authenticity*. The message of authenticity today is that we can't find meaning and purpose outside ourselves, we can only find meaning by looking inside and finding our true selves. In this environment, someone's "true identity" doesn't have to conform to an outside standard of reality, it's only about how you feel.

This is why we have the interesting phenomenon today where people see their biological sex as inconsequential to who they are. What's really important is how you *feel*. On Facebook, you aren't limited to male and female genders, there are more than

50 to choose from. And the reason is that in the age of authenticity, no one should be limited by any reality outside themselves.

But the irony is that while culture has cut the link between biological sex and identity, at the same time, it tells us that our sexual *desires* do determine our identity. Now we know that some people do have emotional and sexual desires for people of the same sex, but a number of recent studies are also showing sexuality—especially among women, but even among some men is much more fluid than is often admitted. Which leads people to change their identity rather than grounding them in God’s creation.

But authenticity doesn’t just show itself when it comes to sexual minorities. Even in traditional marriages, this attitude creeps in so that when someone no longer feels the way they used to toward their spouse, they owe it to themselves to get out, because that’s what will make them happy. There’s little room for struggle. There’s little room for growth and perseverance. It’s all about what makes us happy.

Now again, this isn’t to get you all wound up about how crazy our world is. And it’s not to condemn people who experience same-sex attraction or whose experience of themselves doesn’t match their physical body. There are many wonderful believers who experience those attractions who nevertheless live according to God’s design. But my intent is to describe reality today and why society thinks so much differently about sex than the church.

And not only that, but today, if you've bought into the confusing story our society tells us about sex, I want you to consider the life-giving alternative story of the Bible. I know that's not often the way it's portrayed and I also know that the church itself has not always lived up to the standard we see in the Bible. And we need to own that.

We also need to own up to the fact that we have often treated sexual sins as a different kind of sin than other sins like greed and materialism and pride. And we've considered the sins of gay people as worse than the sins of heterosexuals. And I think the first order of business for Christians isn't to condemn the world, but it's to get our stuff in order. I believe that we need to recommit ourselves to embracing the story of sexuality we find in Scripture.

When we commit to embracing that story, we commit to finding our identity as people made in the image of God and recognizing that every human we see has God-given dignity and worth no matter how much we (or they) fall short of God's ideal.

In Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve sinned, they hid, but God pursued them. They had to live with the consequences of their choices, but God never left them because he loved them. And that's the way God treats all of us, regardless of our sin.

When we commit to embracing that story, we commit embrace our bodies as gifts from God with all its potential as well as limitations of maleness and femaleness, but we also live with understanding, rather than disdain for people who struggle to do that.

When we commit to embracing that story, we commit to sex God's way and trusting in his wisdom that sex is not just to be consumed for our personal pleasure, but for the sake of the Kingdom of God and our society. For those who aren't married, it means trusting God's way why abstaining from sex. For those who are married, it means we commit to loving our spouse by staying true to our wedding vows to love honor and to cherish till death do us part, and to work together with them as our suitable helper for the good of the Kingdom of God rather than just using their body for our pleasure.

When we commit to embracing that story, we recognize that every one of us is like Adam and Eve, because every one of us in one way or another has failed to trust God's goodness and provision and has chosen to go our own way. We have all sinned.

We have to acknowledge that there is a considerable amount of sexual sin, pain and brokenness and it's not just in the world, but in the church. We're not immune.

We experience the pain of divorce or struggling marriages. The struggle of a pornography habit you just can't kick. The pain of regret from casual sexual encounters or giving in to sex because you thought it would be the way to get love, only to find out you've been used. The pain of sexual abuse, which often begins a cycle of more broken sexuality. The struggle with sexual desires you didn't ask for and won't go away. The pain of wanting to find someone to marry, but for some reason can't seem to do so. The pain

of being married and desperately wanting children, but never getting good news. The pain of finding out your spouse has been having an affair.

This isn't what's happening in the world, these are all stories I know are from right here in this church. We all feel the effects of broken sexuality and with any of these, just like Adam and Eve we feel shame and want to hide—from other people and from God, because we're afraid. And too often the response of churches has been to condemnation. But that wasn't God's response.

Jesus shows us God's response in John, chapter 8 when the religious leaders brought a woman caught in the very act of adultery, wanting to stone her. And he looked at them and said, "Let the one of you without sin, cast the first stone." Each of them dropped their stones, one by one until it was only Jesus and the woman remaining.

He said, "Did no one condemn you?" She said, "No one." And Jesus said the words that freed her, "Neither do I. Now, go and sin no more."

If you've fallen short. If you've caused pain or you're experiencing pain from sex that has overflowed its bounds. You can turn to Jesus and find healing and freedom.

This has to be the posture of the church in our day. Society at large doesn't buy in to Biblical sexuality today. And I believe—because we're already starting to see it—there will be many people who will get hurt as a result. That's why it's so important that the Church lives faithfully to God's story of sexuality and embraces Jesus' attitude that God

loves us even in our sin and brokenness. If we do, we can be a refuge for people who are left behind by the world.